



DOUG WHEELER
New Work

DECEMBER 17 - JANUARY 19
MONDAY THROUGH FRIDAY
12:00 P.M. TO 6:00 P.M.

MIZUNO GALLERY
210 E. 2nd STREET
LOS ANGELES, CA 90012
(213) 625-2491



MR & MRS JOHN WHITE
2141 GLENCOE
VENICE, CA 90291

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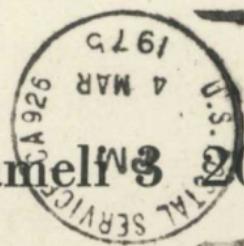
ONE-MAN

DOUG WHEELER

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ONE-MAN

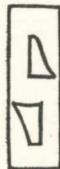
DOUG WHEELER

LIBRARY
LOS ANGELES COUNTY MUSEUM OF ART
LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA

MAR 13 1970

*Die Galerie Schmela,
Düsseldorf, Luegplatz 3, Telefon 573821
zeigt in der Zeit vom 26. Januar
bis 13. Februar 1970*

*Licht-Bilder von Doug Wheeler.
Zum Besuch der Ausstellung sind
Sie herzlich eingeladen*



108

Die Galerie ist geöffnet von montags bis freitags von 10 bis 13 Uhr und
von 15 bis 18 Uhr, sonnabends von 10 bis 14 Uhr.

WHEELER, DOUG

DOUG WHEELER

ONE-MAN

RARY

OCT 16 1980

LOS ANGELES COUNTY
MUSEUM OF ART

PASADENA ART MUSEUM

DOUG

WHEELER

born Globe, Arizona, 1939. Lives Venice, California.

Over the past twelve months three Los Angeles artists whose work involves the use of actual rather than depicted light have been the subject of one-man exhibitions at the Pasadena Art Museum. Doug Wheeler's exhibition is the latest in this series, which began with projected light images of James Turrell and continued with the illuminated and painted discs of Robert Irwin.¹ In addition to their use of light, these artists have in common an involvement with a tradition which any discussion of Wheeler's work must set out to define — a tradition, moreover, that Wheeler's work simultaneously derives from and revolts against.

This is Wheeler's first exhibition. Of the two light paintings shown, one was finished in 1966 and the other in 1967. They clearly reveal a highly mature esthetic and demonstrate that he is a satellite of no other artist. Obviously his use of light connects his work to that of both Turrell and Irwin; but quite apart from the very great difference between the work of these artists, it must be emphasized that each has arrived at his particular esthetic independently, without one being influenced by another. Moreover, although these artists use light as a medium, there is emphatically no such thing as a light movement in Southern California.

In this respect it is perhaps more fortunate than may be casually apparent that Southern California has lacked those indifferent artists to be found in other centers who exploit light to create sculpture-like objects. The absence of a Chryssa or Antonakis on the West Coast has undoubtedly turned out to be an asset; it has permitted these California artists to exploit the medium with a fresh and unspoilt eye. Their use of light arises not out of some idea concerning new media or the marriage of art and technology, but as an extension of their *concept of painting*. Thus the focus of attention on the work of these three artists was from the outset for its implicit *quality as painting* and not for any novelty of medium. Yet their work unquestionably represents a major breakthrough in the use of light. As paradoxical as this may sound, it is exactly this inability of their art to fit neatly within an existing tradition that is a sign of its inherent radicalism. If their work seems willfully inaccessible and to deviate from the established painterly norms, its perversity consists less of an attempt to overthrow painting than a revolt against the prevalent style of perception and feeling current in American art. It is a revolt expressed intuitively, concealed within their art and without any kind of a programmatic bias.

If there is any issue that is crucial to placing these Southern California artists into some kind of perspective, it is the question of the relationship of their work to the fluorescent light sculptures of Dan Flavin.² Each of these four artists aims to set up a situation whereby the traditional object quality inherent to a work of art is de-emphasized or altogether purged from their work. It is not shape as such that is attacked, but materiality. In the work of Irwin, Turrell and Wheeler, who are more attached to the traditional framework of painting than Flavin, it is not only the traditional stretcher and canvas that is thrown out, but also the material quality of paint. In this respect, they are far more radical than the stain painters who minimize the substance of paint by staining it into the weave of the canvas. In the work of these artists every element becomes optical.³ Thus the physical substance of matter, as such, is either eliminated or made to look as if it does not exist. Physical substance is converted into something else which perhaps may best be described as raw visual energy. It is then exploited and used as a component in a much wider situation.

The intent behind this procedure is to eliminate the hypothetical character of the material as well as any hierarchy of residual meaning. It must be clearly understood that these artists are absolutely unsentimental about materials. Fitness for the purpose they have in mind is the sole criteria. Materials are there to be used and the artists are strictly neutral about them; they are neither for them nor against them. But it is essential that any materials or technique they incorporate into their work be denuded of residual meaning. If a material has any associa-

tional overtones it must be stripped of them until it can be viewed for what it is and nothing else. Flavin, for example, remarks "... Electric light is just another instrument. I have no desire to contrive fantasies mediumistically or sociologically over it and beyond it."⁴

Whether these artists are making painting or sculpture would also seem to be a matter of indifference. They do not see themselves as preservationists who are intent on maintaining traditionally discrete esthetic categories. It is important to understand that everything in their work exists in the field of vision. In effect, these artists set up a situation whereby the object cannot act to screen out the experience they create. By using light as a primary means within a spatially controlled environment, their intent is to transcend the objectness of things in order to gain a more direct contact between the viewer and the experience to be perceived. Thus the art experience is literally embodied in a setting that guarantees the perceptual constancy of the body as a whole. The phenomenon of the human body is paramount, and their primary aim as artists is to reshape or change the spectator's perception of the seen world. In short, their medium is not light or new materials or technology, but perception.

The expressiveness of the material, the spatial content of the work of art, and the manner in which these qualities interact, are crucial to abstract art. Together they form an indivisible whole and one cannot be considered separately from the other. The holistic quality of a work — its capacity to create a unified experience which goes beyond and is greater than the sum of the parts — derives from this mutuality of all the parts. Moreover, the act of perceiving is not an objective but an existential act. The eye is no more than an instrument of the body, a material organ. Perception, in its most consequential sense, is a function of the body as a whole and thus is both physiological and psychological in its basis. The perceiver lives through his body and he is alive and at grips with the world to the extent that he has a body. I perceive therefore I am. When we speak, for example, of the sensuousness of the surface in a work of art we perceive that quality as a consequence of bodily function and not as some objective law which can be stated. Equally, that which is most crucial to a work of art — the totality of the experience contained therein — is only to be perceived as a consequence of the perceiver's body.

In the work of these four artists there is a one-to-one relationship between what occurs in the work of art and its perception by the viewer. No act of translation is necessary during this process of perception. In other words, it would appear that insofar as possible these artists avoid the illusion of opticality. Instead, every effect used in their work is real or actualized. A simple analogy will make this clear: Shadow is cast by an absence of light. Its tone derives not from pigment, but out of the substance of sight, and it is perceived as such and therefore is experienced as an actuality. Likewise color as used by these artists is carried directly by the light; it is a quality of the light.

It is, of course, true that certain qualities used within the work of these artists are illusionary. A surface, for example, may be made to look soft when indeed it is hard, or a material which in fact is extremely tangible under one set of circumstances may be made to look intangible by altering the quality of the light illuminating it. Obviously, altering the light also alters the perception as well as the appearance. This is basic to the purpose they hold in mind. This being the case, the disposition of all the parts becomes highly critical, especially the amount of light used, its quantity, quality, color, position, manner of use and, finally, what it does to the space within the viewer's arc of vision.

The spatial experience engendered in the work of these artists is of an extremely complex order and differs widely among them. Beyond the play of figure-ground perceptual ambiguity, or the manner in which the supporting wall is spatially modified by the light falling upon it (or even the occlusion or light in certain areas), these works also engender a sensation of an exploded space: one which

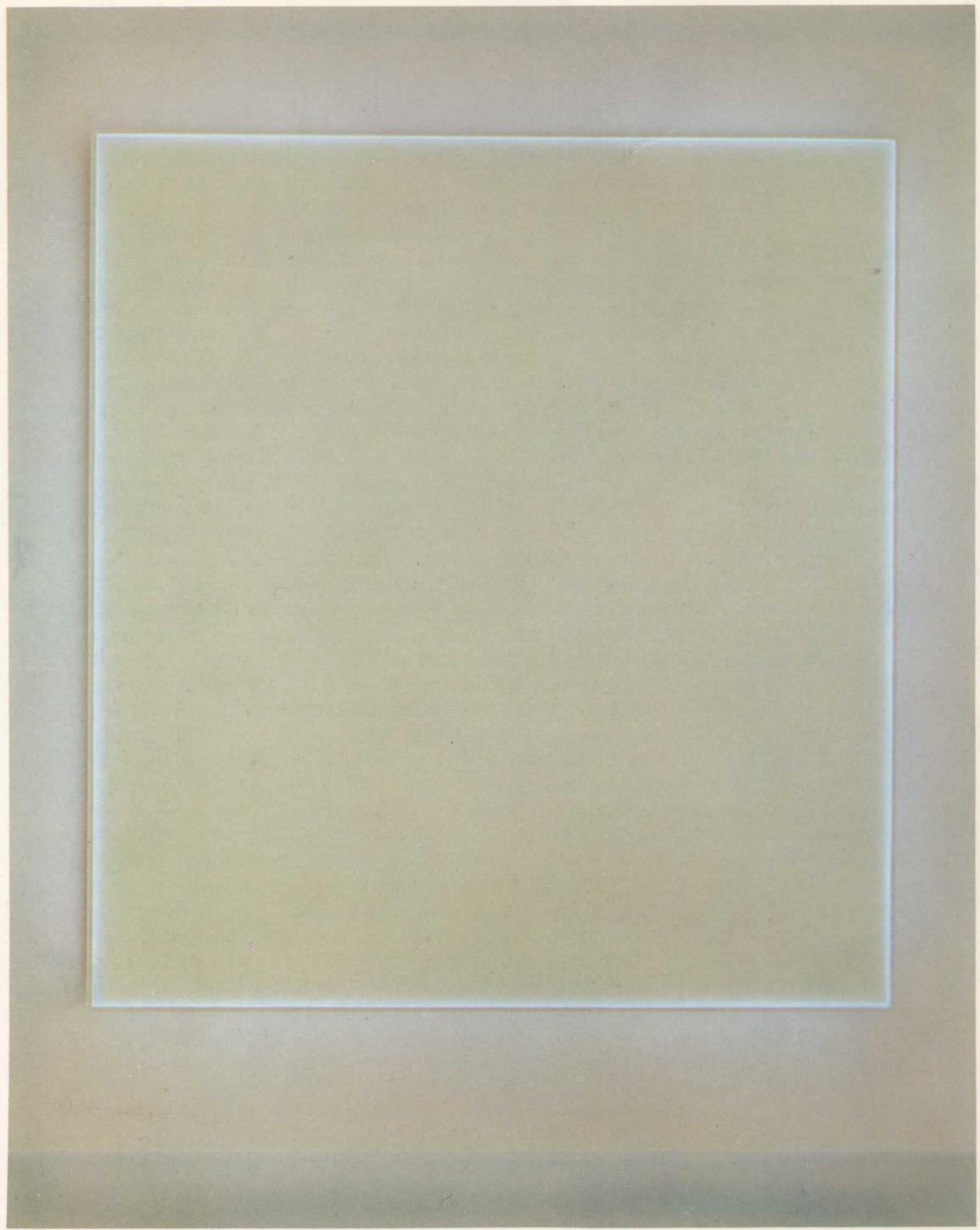
acts to expand the observer's awareness of the physical limits of the gallery and to carry him perceptually beyond them. It is, moreover, a spatial sensation engendered not as a result of any device from naturalistic illusionism but as a consequence of the interplay of light, color and shape within the field of vision.

The two Doug Wheeler light paintings in the exhibition measure 88 by 84 inches and are thus slightly larger than a standing man with his arms outstretched. Their scale is kinesthetic. They approximate the size that can most appropriately encompass all the movements of a human body within a limited space. If the paintings were considerably smaller they would be more related to the act of seeing or, by implication, of reading. If they were any larger there would be a loss of tension. Moreover, the size and type of space in which the painting is displayed is also a factor. If the space is too large or too tall, or if it has distracting features, it can destroy or distort the viewing of the work. This approach to the manner in which the works should be displayed has nothing to do with preciousness on the part of the artist. The point is that in Wheeler's work the one-to-one relationship between each component, including the viewer as well as the context, is an integral part of the work.

In principle, each of these paintings consists of a light box made of sheet plastic, the outer edge of which is $2\frac{1}{2}$ inches deep. The whole box is mounted $2\frac{1}{2}$ inches forward of the wall surface. The rectilinear sheet of $\frac{1}{4}$ inch transparent plastic which forms the frontal plane is laminated onto the sides of the box which is made from $\frac{1}{2}$ inch translucent white plastic. The $\frac{1}{2}$ inch border line formed at the edge by the bonding of the clear plastic to the translucent white plastic is painted black (to occlude the transmission of light) and afterwards with several coats of white paint. This forms a continuous ribbon of white paint approximately $\frac{1}{2}$ inch wide around all the frontal edges. The entire back plane of the frontal sheet of transparent plastic is also sprayed white to occlude light. Mounted behind is a grid of interconnected neon lights which, when switched on, bounces light, blue in one painting and white in the other, against the painted undersurface and the closed back of the light box. The light is thence conducted up the white translucent plastic, underneath the painted edge and into the frontal sheet of transparent plastic. The effect is as follows: First, light is radiated from the white translucent top, bottom and sides of the box, forming a soft-edge band onto the adjoining wall surface and gradually decreasing in intensity as it moves away from the painting. Second, the light which is transmitted up the translucent white plastic top, bottom and sides also enters the frontal sheet of plastic. It is conducted and transmitted across and above the opaque white field (formed by the sprayed white underpainting). It must be emphasized that the light is steady and without any flicker or kinetic impulses; the underpainted white field is impeccably flat and without texture. The light that enters the frontal field creates a radiant glow at the edges and, as it begins to travel across the field towards the center, it rapidly fades. In addition to the subtle quality of the fade another sensation is induced: The surface qualities seem to change in direct response to the degree of movement, however minute, of the observer's position. The changes that take place in the modulation of the surface are very subtle and quite unmechanical in appearance. The surface, in fact, seems to be very alive and gives an impression that it is some kind of organic substance. It would be wrong, however, to suggest that the surface mirrors the movement of the viewer. It does not in any way replicate movement, nor is there a coherent pattern observable in the changes that take place. The effect is much more intangible and quite unpredictable.

The quality of the projected light attaches the painting to the wall and at the same time melds it into the surrounding space; then the field of circulating light takes over and seems to simultaneously assert and deny its own tangibility. Moreover the painting is seen one moment as an object, but the quality of the light emanating frontally and laterally from it denies the objectness. Thus the viewer is constantly bombarded with the requirement to make simultaneous decisions as to what is going on.

(Continued)



2. UNTITLED, 1967

In effect, what Wheeler has done is to bring the crude, raw energy of light under control. He also uses it very successfully to express mood. But a kind of psychological inversion has taken place in his handling of the expressiveness of the material. We are used to thinking of light as something clean, bright and revealing, the very opposite of black which seems somehow to negate. Wheeler transforms light and whiteness until it loses its innate hardness of effect and in his hands it becomes intangible, yet mysteriously evocative of the human presence.

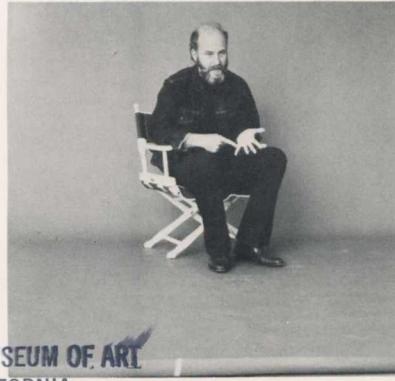
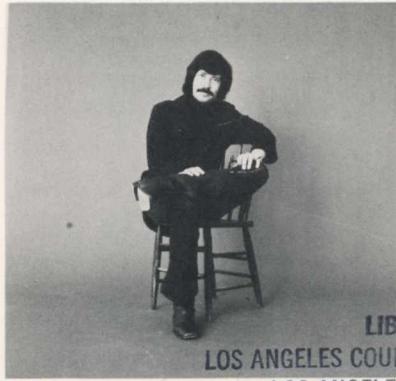
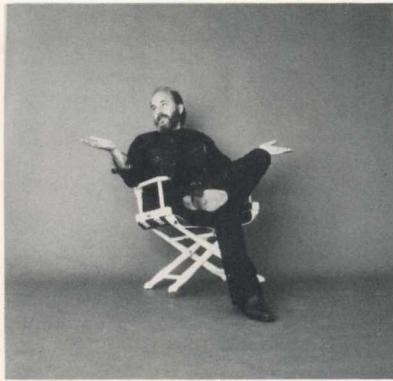
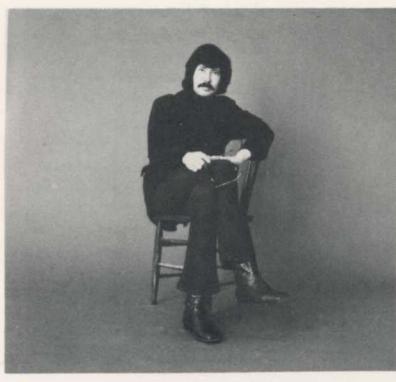
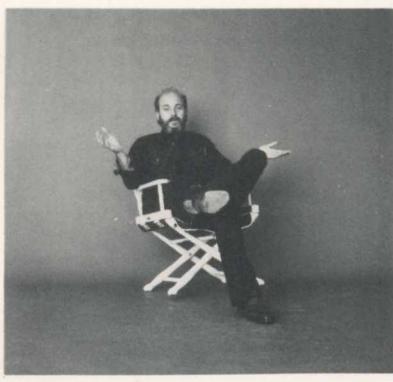
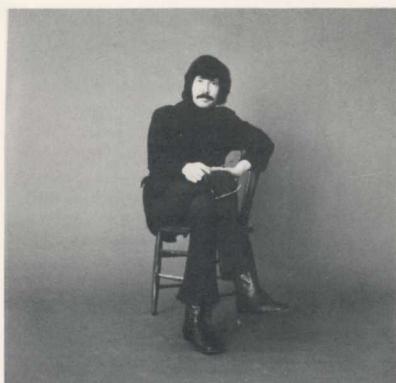
John Coplans

Footnotes

- 1 For a more detailed discussion by the writer of the work of these artists, see the following exhibition catalogues:
Jim Turrell, Pasadena Art Museum, California, 1967.
Robert Irwin, The Jewish Museum, New York, 1968.
- 2 This is not to say that Flavin has had any influence on shaping their sensibility, but simply that they hold in common with him the use of light. Furthermore, to discuss their combined approach from the point of view of new materials or technology will lead to nothing but a dead end. Their work needs to be approached from another angle.
- 3 For example, although Turrell's projected light images can be tangibly experienced, and have an actual existence as two (or sometimes three) dimensional shapes, they are in fact incorporeal. In Irwin's most recent disc paintings (not yet exhibited), and the two works of Wheeler currently exhibited, the use of transparent plastic saturated in light acts to deny the substance of the materials. Flavin arrives at approximately the same position, but from a different direction. He is not nearly so tied to the traditional format of painting as the California artists. By virtue of the manner in which his fluorescent tubes are placed (that is, diagonally spanning the angles of the wall and floor or the internal angle of two adjacent walls, or grouped into configurations), his work only seems to be more sculptural. In fact it inhabits a no man's land and is neither painting nor sculpture. His ready-made, commonplace, fluorescent light fittings and tubes appear to be object-like only when untransformed. Once they are positioned, switched on, and viewed as works of art, their materiality is completely denied. Flavin in fact performs a sleight of hand trick because the objectness of the fluorescent fittings is dematerialized by their being absorbed into the experience he sets out to create. The observer is always aware when viewing the work of these artists of the nature of each component, but they are arranged in such a manner as to transcend what they are and to take on a supra-reality.
- 4 Flavin, Dan. Some Remarks. *Artforum*. Vol. 5, no. 4, December 1966, p. 27.

Exhibition dates: May 28 - June 30, 1968

1. UNTITLED, 1966.
 $88\frac{1}{2} \times 83"$
Lent by the artist.
2. UNTITLED, 1967.
 $88\frac{5}{8} \times 83\frac{5}{8}"$
Collection Mr. and Mrs. James Butler, Los Angeles.



LIBRARY
LOS ANGELES COUNTY MUSEUM OF ART
LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA

JUN 19 1970



ROBERT IRWIN

ROBERT IRWIN - DOUG WHEELER
1969

An exhibition organized by the
Fort Worth Art Center Museum

in cooperation with

The Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D. C.
and the
Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, Holland

FORWARD

The Robert Irwin-Doug Wheeler exhibition developed from a conversation between Eduard de Wilde, director of the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, and myself during his visit to Southern California in March, 1968.

Of the many excellent artists working in that region, de Wilde was most impressed by the visual contributions of Irwin and Wheeler.

It was agreed that an exhibition would be organized by and opened at the Fort Worth Art Center Museum, then travel to The Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D. C. under the directorship of James Harithas and also Walter Hopps of their DuPont Center, and finally be shipped to Holland.

The reader will quickly note that this publication is not an exhibition catalog in the formal sense. There is no catalog list as such, since it was determined that each artist would make available four new works, all of which may or may not be installed, depending upon the space available. Though somewhat unusual, this is not an arbitrary decision, but rather one that allows each object to be seen to best advantage since, when installation is complete, the surrounding environment becomes an integral part of the whole. There are no catalog reproductions, for both artists feel that photographs of their work are at best misleading because the visual effect spreads far beyond the tactile boundaries of the object itself.

Thus, it becomes apparent that this exhibition deals with men who believe that confrontation with the work of art under satisfying environmental conditions is the only way to achieve the desired visual experience. This is not a new phenomenon, certainly a great Bernini Baroque sculpture in its proper niche in its proper church is infinitely more rewarding than the object itself uprooted from its environment. In mid-twentieth century we have become used to compromise and it is therefore doubly exhilarating to find cases where compromise is not acceptable. The modest demands that these artists place upon exhibiting institutions are negligible when compared to the final result.

Jane Livingston, assistant curator of Modern Art at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and frequent contributor to *ArtForum* magazine, was selected to do the essay because of her involvement with the work of Irwin and Wheeler and her proven ability to translate sensitive visual experiences into written form. Jan Butterfield of the same museum compiled the complete bibliography and Jerry McMillan of Los Angeles was contracted to produce the exceptional portrait studies.

Finally, allow me to note my appreciation to my own dedicated staff and those of the other museums who ultimately are responsible for bringing such projects to fruition.

Henry T. Hopkins
Director, March, 1969

The dissimilarities, of intent, of means and in appearances, in the work of Robert Irwin and Doug Wheeler are more striking and more significant than those shared features in their art which in part have led to their being exhibited together on this occasion. They do, as a pair, represent a conscious disengagement from all other Southern California esthetic developments; moreover, they have influenced one another to some extent intellectually. But although each of them employs artificially controlled light as an esthetic medium, it is in ways so disparate that one is extremely reluctant to use this fact as a point of departure in discussing them. Thus in making certain observations about these artists from a generic viewpoint, it is only from the broadest perspective, and strictly in terms of their common art historical heritage and common denials of existing conventions, that one can validly speak.

Historically, there is a remote but envincible parallel to these artists' treatment of light in the high French Impressionist movement from the late 1870s until about 1890, which involved, among other things, attempts to construct and force attention to pictorial microcosms that depicted light in such a way that the eye would become conscious of its physical components—many of the Pointillist paintings of Seurat and Monet are a sort of metaphor to the actual, invisible nature of light as energized particles (in a sense, matter) organized in waves. (It is noteworthy that Irwin's stylistic progression over the last six or seven years, from the line paintings, through the dot paintings into the present disc series has on one level such affinities to the history of French Pointillist-Impressionism over a comparable period. With his increased use of fixed exterior lighting, creating ambient rather than closely object-bound situations, he is moving out of this pattern.) The most optical issues raised by Seurat and Monet were not immediately followed up, but for the most part remained latent through the decades in which the structural and pictorial problems of Cubism dominated both European and American esthetics. The early experimenters in kinetic light such as Thomas Wilfred and the Russian Constructivists who talked of erecting "light spectacles" operated in terms fundamentally irrelevant to Impressionism's potential for elaboration, and can perhaps be held partly responsible for a great many of the unfruitful applications of artificial light in the interim, and at present.

Quite obviously, the analogy with nineteenth century Impressionism ceases to have bearings on the present artists' work when it is considered apart from its (largely theoretical) opticality. It is the classic Pointillists' intense interest in light as such, and their way of occasionally penetrating, and of pinning down, certain qualities of luminosity, that make them so clearly precursory to the artists in question.

Nearly all the recent works of Irwin and Wheeler require a more or less prolonged viewing period; one must be willing at some point to relent wholly to the presented circumstances, rather than studying detail or mechanism for clues to the artist's

intention. He is asked to grasp an environmental field of dispersed incident and to partake of it. However, their approach to "environmentalism" is not like that of the many contemporary kinetic/light artists who either literally surround the spectator with the work of art (neither of them to date has made a piece that one must walk into), or who combine luminosity with moving or internally fluctuating elements. The concept that Anton Ehrenzweig has called "undifferentiated scanning," or syncretistic, as opposed to analytic, vision, is eminently relevant to the mode of esthetic experiencing these artists are calling for. More than just the virtues of a state of total conscious and subliminal awareness, each is striving quietly for expanded awareness, and for nonhabitual ways of perceiving "reality." Thus, for instance, Irwin seeks ambiguity in his use of color, which is sometimes so low in saturation as to disappear or merge confusingly with adjacent hues, making the viewer exert himself to keep the "real" appearance in focus; Wheeler scales his works so that the delimited area is entirely in view but escapes instantaneous apprehension because the emitted light seems continually to seep away. But if they were merely offering mildly diverting sensory illusions, to perhaps startle the spectator and force him to make an optical adjustment, it would scarcely be worth the effort. The value and success of their art at its best resides to an unusual degree in the excruciating control, restraint and subtlety of the effects achieved, and in the artists' exceptionally sophisticated understanding of the arduous art historical and cultural inventions from which they are departing. To characterize their work as "radical" is somehow to miss the point. There is a nascent inevitability in the directions they pursue; moreover there is nothing demonstrably unique or isolated about their underlying assumptions. Significantly, none of them is concerned very much to earmark his work stylistically. The issue of style in at least one of its senses—as a distinctive idiomatic device or look that serves to personalize a product in the way of a signature—ceases to be of central importance here, and may well become less and less relevant especially for Wheeler, who has only in the last two years attained real artistic maturity.

Robert Irwin's impact on his peers and many younger Los Angeles artists, as a theorist and ideological mentor, has been immeasurable. The extent to which his work has directly influenced that of Wheeler is open to question, but there is no doubt that his presence here has affected other art. Irwin continuously formulates positions; he is often dogmatic; and he insists that his work be evaluated scrupulously and with conscious reference to his dialectics. Because his production has been of such consistently high quality over the last eight years, his philosophical stances have been taken extremely seriously, and it is in fact difficult, knowing him, to consider his work without reference to his own views and stated intentions.

Irwin has come to his present esthetic position as a painter, out of the late 'fifties milieu in Los Angeles comprised of artists who were unanimously taking their departures from various New York School and Northern California modes of Abstract

Expressionism. He is no longer by any means a "gestural" painter, but the terms of his art still reflect a desire to relieve the hand-made esthetic object of its familiar iconographical or "purely formal" residua within the basic conventions, and from the perspective, of a painter. By the time of the completion of the first series of disc paintings, which had taken the artist all of 1966 and 1967 to accomplish, many of the fundamental tenets of his present artistic goals were established. The first series of wall-mounted discs measured four or five feet, respectively, in diameter; they were made of aluminum, hand formed into a slightly convex shape about 2½ inches deep, and their frontal surfaces were sprayed with opaque acrylic paint, in concentric, variously colored rings, greyish or off-white in the center with the thin outer ring conforming in hue and value to the color of the wall behind. Besides the necessity of matching the wall color to the piece when it was installed, four low-intensity incandescent lights had to be mounted, two on the floor and two from the ceiling, so that they cast a four-part, roseate pattern of shadows on the wall behind the disc, framing it symmetrically. It is clear not only that Irwin was theoretically concerned with more than just the painted image, but that the controlled environment made it imperative for the viewer to confront the work in the flesh, rather than through reproduction, even to fully see it. He emphasized verbally that what he required of the spectator was for him literally to "enact the process of the work's conception," and expected the viewer intuitively to grasp his private dialectical history; one would proceed, for instance, from virtually irreducible form back towards a multiple one, and the key to understanding a seminal aspect of the esthetic would be in perceiving for oneself the artist's chosen solution to handling the unavoidable appearance of residual imagery. There were of course serious problems arising out of the inevitable discrepancy between the artist's stated demands, and actual, uninformed confrontation with the works, which were, for one thing, exceedingly elegant and often ravishingly beautiful; one was not necessarily inclined, at least consciously, to respond so searchingly as hoped. In the end, this discrepancy may seem no more consequential than in the case of any other artist, except that for Irwin the very content of the work is much more closely bound to his expressed aims than is ordinarily true.

The 1968 disc paintings begin to reflect a new range of concerns, and show Irwin to be committing himself to quite a different set of conceptual priorities. He has always questioned the premises on which the whole of nineteenth and twentieth century art have devolved, and he is temperamentally obsessed with the precarious relativity and the transiency of any given cultural framework of perceptual habits. The issues which compel him are fundamentally those whose most direct current domain is the field of perceptual psychology. He is interested, as are many artists, in the possibilities for undermining conditioned responses, for extending the threshold of human sensitivities, and ultimately for introducing esthetic terms that are based

in entirely different assumptions about space, time, object/subject qualities, etc. than those on which we presently operate. His researches into these broad areas have not yet been entirely assimilated into his work. The new disc paintings are no less refined, and no less restrictive in their specific purposes, than any of his past work. They are more detailed and thus perhaps fuller of "residual imagery" than the just previous paintings; they are also more "optical." By forming them out of plastic, introducing a diversely colored, three-inch band horizontally through the center, and varying the degrees of opacity and translucency in each work, Irwin has shifted his emphasis to the objects' qualities of etherealness and interior equivocation, while at the same time making the discs more susceptible to their candescent environments—more subtly conditioned by an absorbed into light—than in any former work. The present discs are somewhat smaller than the earlier ones, measuring 46 or 54 inches in diameter, and 3½ inches in depth. The central segment of each spray-painted band is in opaque hues, thinning out toward the edges into sheer transparency. The color itself has a strangely equivocal nature. It is generally low-keyed, verging on warm blacks in the middle and resolving, for example, into a slightly cooler, greenish grey and then into a barely warmer pink-tinged tonality. It is as if, looking at the chromatic passage, one is seeing light, or, in another way, simply a shadowy cavity in space, rather than a section of flat pigmentation. The remainder of each disc is whitish, sprayed nearly opaque within the concentric central area, and becoming gradually more translucent toward the periphery, so that the rear shadows cut at least eight inches into the image. As in the first disc paintings, these are mounted about 24 inches from the wall and illuminated by four incandescent sources which cast interlocking shadows on the wall.

The discs appear literally to dissolve into light, to deny themselves corporeality. If one focuses his eyes steadily upon the middle of the band, at a certain point all the surrounding detail (the rest of the pale disc, its linear edge, the wall) disappears, or seems to fade into a featureless and indeterminate field. At these moments one is seeing just a disembodied stripe of shadowy color; a halo effect around the intensely colored segment heightens the sharpness of line. The illusion is also of a rectangular, concave depression dipping into empty space. The object has relinquished its perceptible attachment to haptic properties (weight, texture and density) and becomes—not a thing firmly located in measured, perspective space, but itself an insubstantial, positive/negative inhabitant of the air. Scanning the total field, that sharp, modulated swatch of color remains somehow a free, metastatic element rather than merely a painted image.

Doug Wheeler's 1968 works measure 8 x 8 or 8 x 10 feet; each is made basically of a smooth, semi-opaque sheet of white plexiglas forming the frontal plane, behind which neon tubes are mounted in varying configurations (in the center or around the periphery). The rear panel of each work is opaque; the front sheet of plastic is

curved back at the edges to meet the back support, so that the effect as one faces the work is of a unitary, uninterrupted, reflective form, suspended away from the wall several inches, radiating light.

Wheeler has set for himself a considerably problematic task. The stringently controlled and systematic way in which his esthetic has evolved so far reflects his constant struggle to break down the raw physical assertiveness of his primary material, plastic, to make it function as a relaxed vehicle for light. That one's awareness of this quality between the autonomous concreteness of his structures and the dematerializing properties of the whitish light they emit is not distracting, but rather enhancing of the experience, indicates the artist's success in striking a balance between the degree and kind of illumination in each work, its range of emission beyond the confines of the plastic receptacle, and the overall scale of each work. The differences between his approximately 7 x 7 foot series and the larger series of 1968 are critical, though not apparently spectacular. The earlier works were more literally light boxes, with the facing segment of translucent plastic set against a 2½ inch deep, square-cut plastic frame, thus a distinct edge terminated the smooth surface panel abruptly on all sides. The rear of the facing sheet was painted white except for a narrow line around the perimeter where a sharply defined rim of light concentrated. In the larger 1968 works, the entire frontal component is uniform in translucency; there is no artificial inflection of the plastic casement to effect dramatic modulations in the intensity or configuration of the neon light. The placement of the neon tubes alone determines the respective centeredness, expansiveness, or centripetality of the radiated light. The works with coils of neon tubes located in the center, so that the intensity of light fades increasingly into grey toward the edges, tend to project light; the sense is of energy collected neutrally and then dispersed, dissipating as it reaches the perimeter and then somehow metamorphosing as a dimly charged field, beyond the boundaries of the object, in the air around and against the wall. Those with neon tubes placed around the edges of the work tend to retreat, or to sink away from where one stands, and even from the wall. The immediately flanking wall area is of course more brightly washed with light around these pieces than in the others, and there is some accumulation of luminal intensity within the four corners of the plastic panel. The most critical region, however, is the "empty" center, which takes on the character either of a depthless, pulsating void, or a loaded field of an almost tangible, positive greyness, alternatively. The subtler the contrast between the lighted edge and dim interior in these works, the more enigmatic and probing is the resulting aura.

Several points should be noted with respect to the implications of these 1968 pieces in the context of Wheeler's whole development and his over-reaching intentions. It is evident that his newer work, in relation to the box-shaped pieces, signifies a shift and a gain in authority which, if not radical, is of key significance. The single fact that he eliminated the visible two-part construction in favor of a monolithic and fluent

form indicates his dissatisfaction with, on the one hand, the look of a built object and all its sculptural ramifications; and on the other, the works' sense of relative containment, closure and rigidity. The later works hold a latent potential for material transcendence. They begin to release the non-tactile, non-material field of light from its receptacle, and to use light in ways that directly affect one's perceiving of three-dimensional space. Light becomes an active and positive element. Depending upon the size and scale of the room in which they are displayed, the works can seem to dwarf the area in which they exist, or expand it; their placement away from the wall makes them appear to hover, thus creating ambivalences in terms of the viewer's apprehending of the space behind and in front of the object. It is important to stress that Wheeler scrupulously avoids tricky illusionistic devices; one is not intentionally baffled by his effects, or urged to investigate the mechanism cerebrally, in order to discover its "magic." The straightforwardness of his medium accounts in large part for our willingness to stay with and relent to the situation, not in the same way we experience most paintings, but with coexisting levels of spatial and formal awareness. Though Wheeler began as a painter, he has been able to circumvent the exhaustive fore-process of painterly or pictorial, refinement and elimination of residual elements that Irwin undertook. (It is in part owing to Irwin's groundwork that the younger artist was able to proceed as he has.) Wheeler arrived at his increasingly non-pictorial esthetic early on, and yet has assimilated many of the hard-won solutions of subtly optical painting. His direction is tending increasingly toward a more environmental approach; he is prepared now to free light from a determinate encasement and to allow it to function in an entirely spatial and atmospheric domain.

JANE LIVINGSTON

Los Angeles 1969

ROBERT IRWIN

Born Long Beach, California, 1928; lives in Los Angeles. Attended Otis Art Institute, Los Angeles, 1948-50; Jepson Art Institute, Los Angeles, 1951; Instructor at: Chouinard Art Institute, 1957-58 University of California, Los Angeles, 1962. University of California, Irvine, 1968-69.

ONE MAN EXHIBITIONS

Felix Landau Gallery, Los Angeles, 1957. Ferus Gallery, Los Angeles, 1959, 1960, 1962, 1964. Pasadena Art Museum, 1960, 1968; Pace Gallery, New York, 1966, 1968.

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

Annual Exhibition—Artists of Los Angeles and Vicinity, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1952, 1953, 1956, 1957, 1958, 1959, 1960. 57th Annual Exhibition—Sculpture, Painting, Watercolors, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 1957.

Fifty Paintings by Thirty-Seven Artists of the Los Angeles Area, University of California, Los Angeles, 1960. Pacific Profile of Young West Coast Painters, Pasadena Art Museum, 1961.

Fifty California Artists, 1962. Organized by the San Francisco Museum of Art with the assistance of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

Seven New Artists, Sidney Janis Gallery, New York, 1964. The Responsive Eye, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1965.

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VIII São Paulo Biennale, 1965. São Paulo Biennale—United States of America's exhibition organized by the Pasadena Museum of Art and shown in São Paulo in 1965 and at the National Collection of Fine Arts, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. in 1966.

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DOUG WHEELER

Doug Wheeler was born in Globe, Arizona, 1939. Lives in Venice, California.

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Pasadena Art Museum
May, 1968

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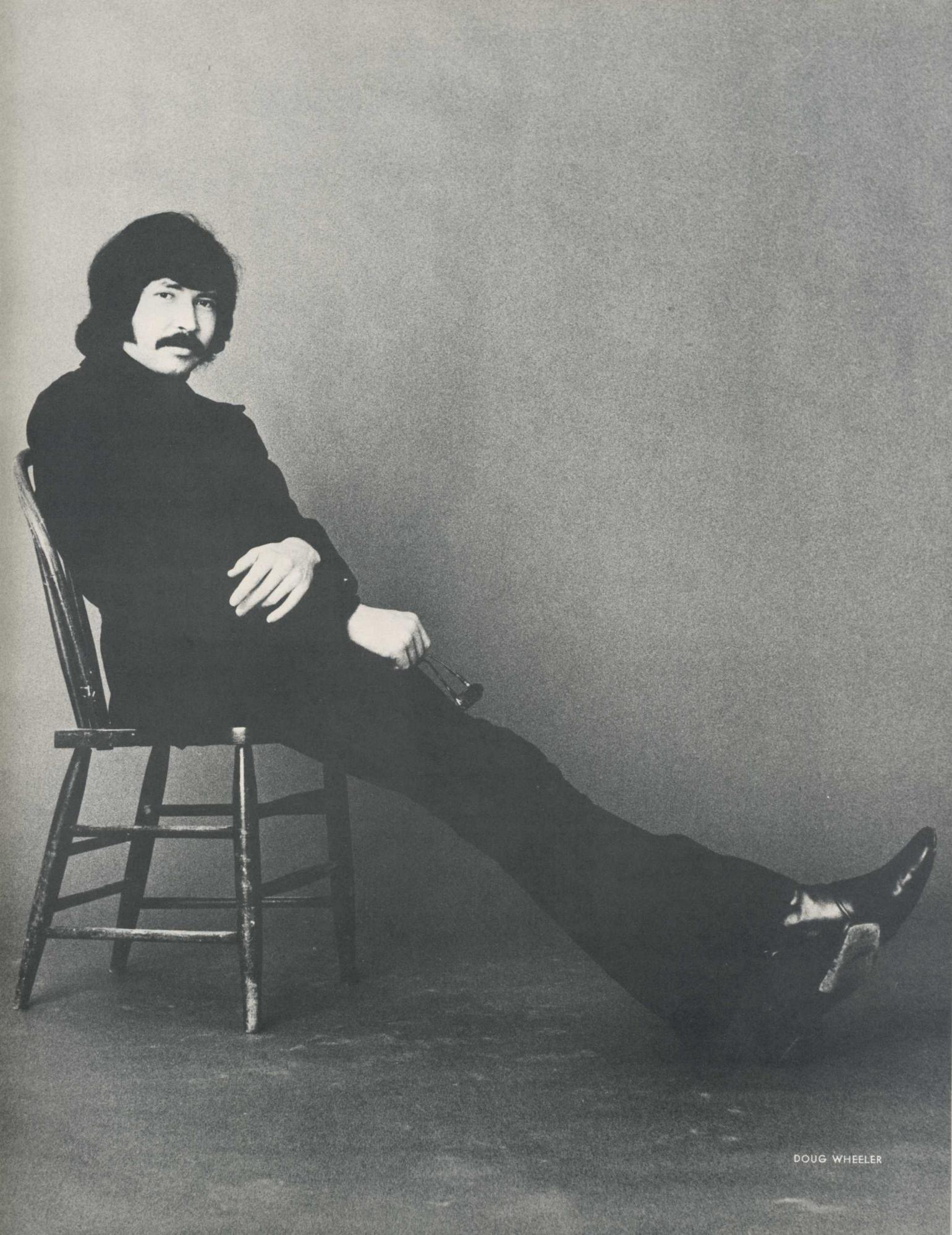
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DOUG WHEELER

